

# **Chess Growth Hacking: How I went up 500+ elo within 12 months without a chess coach**

During my time spent on the road of improvement, I came across many chess articles on how to improve at the game. Sadly, almost all these pages were:

- About what or how to study, and we will discuss why chess improvement is more than just studying.
- Inapplicable to all levels of chess at the same time
- Written by content creators and marketers - not chess experts.

I hope this post tackles these problems and gives you a comprehensive guide to growing your chess much faster than can be conventionally achieved. This is not just a chess improvement article. You can apply what you read in this post for improvement in any aspect of your life. Don't worry though, we will discuss methodologies specifically targeted at chess growth.

## **The four-minute mile**

The four-minute mile has long been considered the greatest athletic test to the human body. The consensus was that humans are not physically designed to achieve such a feat. The so-called "experts" only reinforced this belief, introducing a mental barrier.

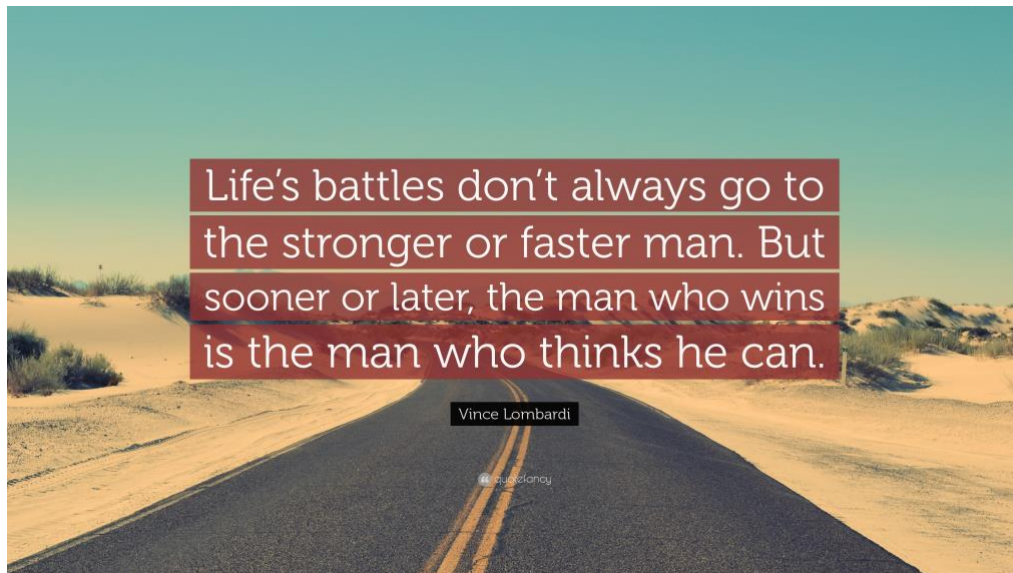
But there was one young man who refused to accept it as a reality. Roger Bannister brainwashed himself into believing that it was possible to run a mile in under 4 minutes. He was constantly criticized by the British Press for his "lone wolf" approach, and his unconventional training regime.

But in 1954, on a cold day with a wet track and a crowd just shy of a thousand people, he shocked the world by running a mile in just 3 minutes and 58 seconds.

Not only did this change his life, it also permanently shifted perspectives on what the human body was capable of.

Newly armed with the belief that it was possible, runners scrambled to complete this challenge themselves. Within just 46 days, Bannister's record was broken by Australian runner John Landy. Today, even top high school athletes can run a mile in less than 4 minutes.

## **The Power of Self-Efficacy**



Confidence with our abilities in the domains of life is known as self-efficacy.

After studying this topic for decades, psychologist James Maddux has concluded that believing that we can succeed is one of the most important ingredients for success.

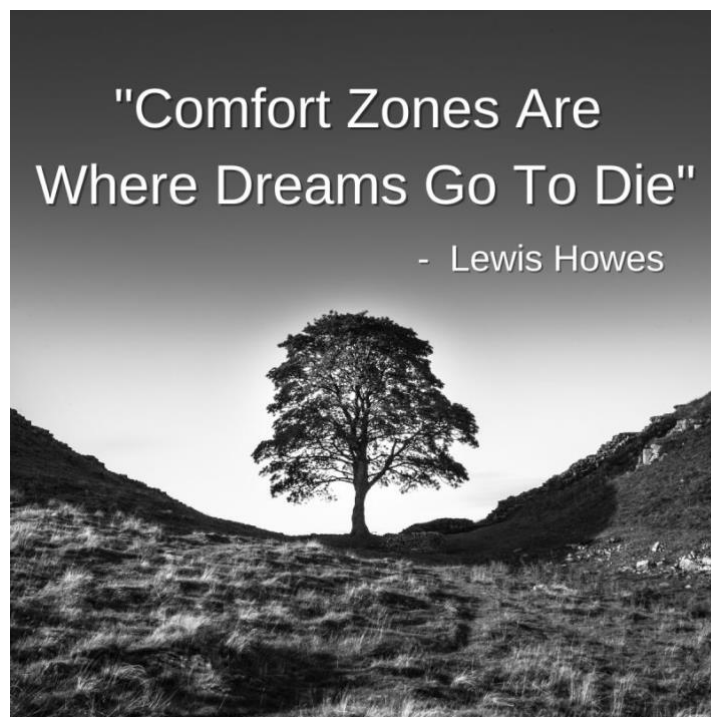
Not only does self-efficacy increase our likelihood of success, it also helps maintain motivation, remain consistent and improve learning ability.

This is the secret sauce of improvement not only in chess, but in any endeavor, at any stage of life.

# **My 3-step plan for chess improvement and the golden ratio**

## **1. Study**

Studying does not mean learning a new opening each time. You must study what you perceive to lack the most. You must step out of your comfort zone in order to improve the most efficiently.



Whether you're a complete beginner and you need to study the opening principles or you're an intermediate player who frequently misplays Isolated Queen's Pawn (IQP) positions, you need to delve into the topic which is causing you the most losses.

My biggest problem was rook endgames, so I spent time watching YouTube videos with an analysis board open at the same time, critically exploring lines which I didn't understand and how to defend them. It is also important to note

that I didn't use the computer to find what the correct way to play the position was.

When you're studying openings, you should first create a PGN file with all moves you already know for that opening. As you learn more and more lines in the opening, keep adding these to your PGN file. Avoid wasting time learning silly traps. They cause more harm than good for your own chess.

But it's not just the moves that matter, you must also understand why each move is played, what kind of middlegames tend to come out of your opening (are they attacking, defensive or positional games?) - and you need to know what your plan will be. It is not necessary to memorise all your lines up to move 20 – in fact it is detrimental to your chess growth.

The middlegame that you play stems out of your opening, so you should study the games of grandmasters that follow the same opening as you did, again watching YouTube videos that cover a game wherever possible – in order to have expert explanations of the topic.

You will play a wide variety of endgames in your chess career. The most efficient way of studying endgames is not to study specific positions, but to study piece dynamics. For example, Bishop vs Knight, Queen vs Two Rooks, oppositely-coloured Bishops, Rooks vs Rooks.

Again, the best way is to study grandmaster games. If you cannot tell by now, I am a big fan of YouTube, because of the myriad of enjoyable and instructive chess content available.

## **2. Practice**

You will forget everything you study without practice. Dedicated practice is when you specifically practice those things that you have learned.

There are two ways to practice effectively:

- The 9-game method

Play exactly 9 blitz games in a row. Be strict with yourself. Don't start the session unless you have time to finish all 9 games and don't play any more than 9. This makes each training session comparable to the last. Something you can use to uncover your weaknesses

Set yourself an ambitious but achievable goal of how many points you will get out of 9, and maybe even tell your parents about this so they can hold you accountable. You can then treat yourself when you achieve that goal.

My goal used to be 7.5/9. Whenever I achieved this goal, I used to eat my favourite ice cream.

Many believe that blitz games are silly, they don't show the "real" you and they don't help you find your strengths and weaknesses. But in fact, it's quite the opposite...

4 weeks back, I was playing blitz games on chess.com, and I was losing almost every single game, because I was tilting. I lost more than 250 elo and I was playing the worst chess I could possibly play.

But during this time, I never played my opening incorrectly, missed any simple tactics like forks and skewers, or allowed myself to get checkmated in one move. These are all beginner mistakes that I didn't make because I have developed something known as unconscious competence.



In comparison to a long game where you have time to carefully consider each move and outcome and make the optimal decision, blitz games are mostly played on your intuition. We can leverage this advantage to gauge where different aspects of our game fit within this model of unconscious competence. It's very easy for you to then notice whether you prefer trading the Queens and playing a slow game or prefer to push pawns and create an attack.

- Playing with a training partner

The most efficient and fun way to learn is with a training partner. From memorising new openings, applying new middlegame and endgame techniques to improving your main weaknesses – a training partner has the power to grow your chess faster than you ever could on your own.

Your training partner is someone who will provide a tough challenge. They will motivate you, hold you accountable and push you beyond your limits. When you are feeling low, commitment to your friend may be the best thing to motivate you.

Training partners also provide great feedback! Someone who you frequently train with probably knows your chess better than you do. He or she is a fantastic person to get advice from about what your next step should be.

Choosing the right training partner:

The most important trait of your training partner is that they get along with you. You should be able to trust and rely on them, and they should also genuinely care about your performance – rather than getting jealous if you improve quicker than them. You don't need to be best friends, but someone that you feel uncomfortable with is not going to motivate you in the long run.

Find a training partner that is as hungry as you are. If your goals don't seem to match, then they won't be pushing as hard as you are (or vice versa). You and your training partner's chess styles should be contradictory. I am a very aggressive player who always wants to play with the initiative, but my partner

was a solid, positional player. Because of this, we had lots to learn from each other.

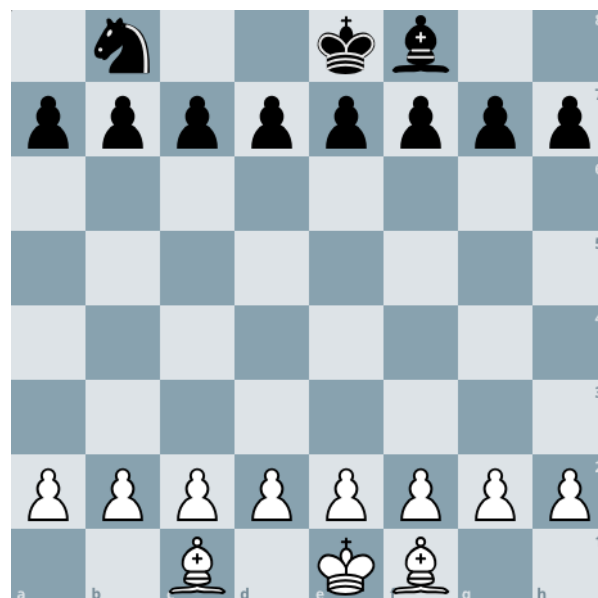
A stronger training partner (if they are happy to work with you) is a fantastic help to your chess growth. You may have heard the saying - “If you want to be a millionaire, surround yourself with millionaires”. This advice applies to all walks of life.

## **YOUR TRAINING PARTNER CANNOT BE A BOT.**

Some practical tips:

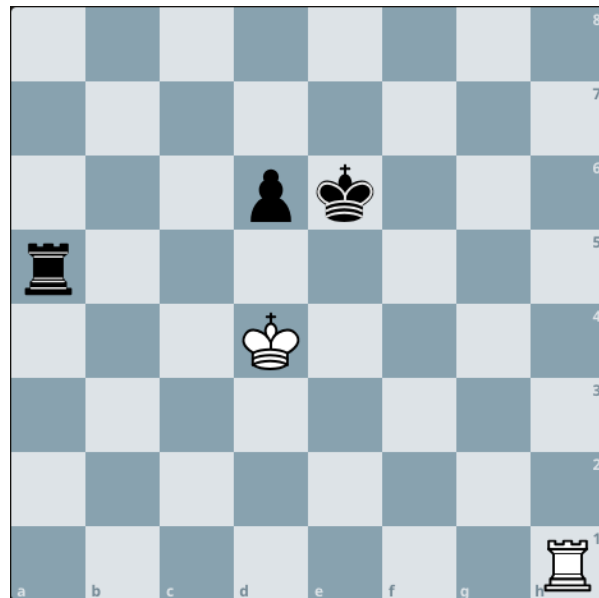
I earlier talked about not just memorising the moves of your opening, but also understanding the ideas behind them. After learning a new line of your opening, you and your training partner can play a few games in that specific opening in order to understand its ideas.

You can also use pre-made positions to practice any specific area of your game that you need to work on. Below is the first position I recommend you try out:



See if you can convert the bishop pair advantage to a win as white and defend against it with black.

You can create positions like these for any strategic concept you want to practice. Below is another endgame example:



You have just studied the Philidor position. You can use a position like this to practice it – see if you can defend as white, or somehow trick your opponent and win as black.

### 3. Analyse

Practicing by itself is not going to help you fix your mistakes. It's from objective analysis of your games that you will learn. You must analyse each and every one of your games.

First, you should compare the opening you played to your PGN file. For each mistake you make, do one push-up. If everything you did was right, that's a sign that you have developed unconscious competence.

Then briefly review your game with stockfish – only searching for blunders, don't give much heed to its suggested moves or evaluation. Leave it running too long and it will say all your moves are wrong! For example, if the evaluation is 0.5 and then you played a move that made it -4.0, then that's a blunder.



Try to find the root cause of your blunders. Personally, most of my blunders come from backwards knight moves. Once you know what tactics you struggle with, give a greater weight to them in your study plan.

#### **4. The Golden Ratio**

The golden ratio is the proportion of time you should allocate to study, practice and analysis that will yield the greatest results.

Study: 30%

Practice: 50%

Analysis: 20%

This doesn't necessarily mean your daily chess training time is split up in this way. It is your choice of the time period over which you will average this ratio.

For example, you can set your time period to be one week. Let's say you have 5 hours in a week to which you allocate chess. One way you can split it is as follows:

- 1h 30 studying (can be split across multiple days)
- 1h 30 for a 9-game session (must be completed in one sitting)
- 30 mins spent on its analysis (can be next day)
- 1h practicing with training partner (ideally also in one sitting)
- 30 mins spent on its analysis (also can be next day)

### **Success Awaits!**

I hope this article will provide the necessary steps you need to follow in order to grow your chess astronomically fast. Whether you take my advice on board or not, I wish you all the very best in your chess journey and I hope that you will make it into a Wilson's chess team soon.

Happy Checkmating!

*Written by Rahul Babu, Year 12 on 16 Mar 2024.*